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# The New Testament Narratives of the Resurrection.

GEORGE M. HARMON.

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# Fact or Fiction

IN THE

## New Testament Narratives of the Resurrection.

BY

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GEORGE M. HARMON, A. M.,

Professor of Biblical Theology in Tufts College Divinity School.

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UNIVERSALIST PUBLISHING HOUSE,  
BOSTON.

1894.

THE  
UNIVERSALIST  
PUBLISHING HOUSE

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The Barta Press:  
L. BARTA & Co., BOSTON.

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THE historical criticism of the New Testament, in general, is of primary importance, since upon its results depends the estimate to be held of original Christianity, the essential contents of the faith in its beginning, and what is valid in the beginning of its historical development. If fiction entered to any important extent into the records of the faith, to just that extent its elements must be eliminated, and the whole structure modified from beginning to end. The application of the critical process to the narratives of the resurrection has a special importance, as the belief in it held a specially important place in apostolic thought, and has come down to us with special influence upon the

hopes and faiths of the entire Christian world of to-day.

There are those to whom the consideration I have just urged comes with such force that they combat with utmost earnestness everything that can in any way call in question the historical validity of the old foundations, and look with open hostility on the very process of historical inquiry itself. But such an attitude has neither wisdom nor faith in it. The process is valid and necessary, the inquiry helpful and inevitable. The candid student and the sincere believer in Christian truth has neither right nor reason to shrink from the inquiry. He should meet it fearlessly and faithfully, and pursue it without prejudice and unswerved by either doctrinal or scientific prepossession. For there is to-day a marked inclination to close the inquiry on one side by putting up the barrier of certain scientific theories, and refusing to allow any inquiry beyond their conclusions. It may be sufficient in referring to this point to urge the fact that the resurrection of Christ touches a set of phenomena whose field is still under inquiry by scientific men, and in which the wisest of them maintain a modest reserve ; and also to call attention to the fact that the inquiry is strictly a historical one in which doctrinal

or scientific belief is impertinent. So, discarding both the apologetic temper and scientific dogmatism, let us make the inquiry.

I. We have as our witnesses a great mass of documents in the shape of manuscripts, versions, and writings of the fathers, reaching back into the Second Century of our era. The origin of many of the manuscripts and versions is veiled in obscurity ; but they have been subjected to such thorough-going criticism that their approximate age and place of origin have been satisfactorily ascertained. The manuscripts fall into certain well-defined groups or families, having certain distinguishing marks in their form of the text. It appears that these manuscripts were copied at different dates and in different countries, thus forbidding collusion between their copyists. This fact helps us answer the important question as to the genuineness of the copies. If there were a disposition to introduce legends into the sacred writings, it would be impossible that the same legends should be introduced by different scribes, writing in different countries, and at different times ; and so there would be found a growing number and variety of legends introduced, as the manuscripts were multiplied from age to age. But no such legendary accretions are to be found in



our manuscripts of the New Testament. The fact that these manuscripts have been discovered from time to time, during the past two centuries, until now the number has become very great, and the companion fact that these discoveries have revealed no radical variations from the text as it was known two centuries ago, seem to show that there has been no important additions of legends since the date of our earliest manuscripts: the middle of the Fourth Century. Yet the period through which this copying took place was the very period of all, in which pious forgeries took place, and when the sense of truth was the most lax. It may be urged with justice that during this time the superstitious regard in which the sacred writings were held, protected them from corruption, since they were idolized, and any intentional departure from their received form was regarded as the wickedest crime against God, and sure to bring his wrath down upon the head of the offender. We find this conviction operating from the middle of the Second Century; and we therefore are led to infer that the freedom from corruption would be apt to exist as far back as that time. But we are not left entirely to inference, since the writings of the fathers show us the text in substantially

its present form as far back as that time. But this leaves us with a dark zone of time, to the extent of a whole century, before we reach the origin of the earliest of our New Testament writings. They were not then considered sacred. Might they not have suffered corruption during this century? There are critics who hold that they did. This is the question we are next to examine.

II. And at this point the investigation passes from historical to literary criticism. We are to deal now, not with the age of the documents as determined by witnesses and by the marks of time, but with their statements as related to each other, and as seen in the light of the different times in which critics agree they were written. Do the literary contents show any marks of the growth of legend as we pass from the earlier to the later writings? If these documents had their different origins from the year 50 A. D. till the year 140 A. D.—to take the figures of the most radical critics—and if legend-making was going on during this time, then there should appear with significant plainness the signs of the growth of legend. As we are to do with the stories of the resurrection of Christ, we will confine our attention to the Gospels and the First Epistle to the Corinthians.

There is a division among the critics as to whether Matthew or Mark came first in order of time ; but as some of those who place Matthew first hold that it was in a form decidedly unlike its present form, and one in which the story of the resurrection was not found, we will assume the priority of Mark, and give him the date of between 60 A. D. and 70 A. D. Then follows Matthew in his present form, whose date has been variously assigned as from 68 A. D. to near the close of the First Century ; then comes Luke, assigned to some time between 70 A. D. and 80 A. D., and last of the Gospels, John, placed by different critics from the year 90 to the year 140. The First Epistle to the Corinthians, critics are generally agreed, was written about the year 57.

It has been held as significant that the last twelve verses of the sixteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, which contain the story of the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, did not form a part of the original writing, but were added by a later hand. And from this conclusion of the critics it has been inferred that the resurrection was not a part of the original tradition, but that it crept in somewhat later. We have something to say as to this matter of the absence of the resurrection story from Mark a

little later ; but we will take it as the critics wish, and proceed with our inquiry. Mark tells us of the visit of the women to the tomb early on the morning of the first day of the week, of their finding it empty, and of their seeing the angel who tells them that Jesus is risen from the dead, and instructs them to tell this to his disciples, and that he goes before them into Galilee, where they shall see him. The narrative concludes that the women fled from the sepulchre with fear and trepidation, and told no man anything about what they had seen or heard ; and then the narrative is abruptly closed.

Matthew, next in order of time, follows (xxviii. 1 ff.) with the coming of the women to the tomb early on the beginning of the first day of the week ; he relates that there had been a great earthquake, that an angel had come down from heaven and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre, and that he appeared to the women whom he addressed, telling them not to fear, but go tell his disciples that he had risen from the dead, and would go before them into Galilee, where they would see him. Matthew then says that they departed with great joy to tell the disciples, and that as they went they met Jesus, and held him by the feet and worshipped him ; that, later, Jesus ap-

peared to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and told them that he is to be with them forever. The story of the earthquake, of the keepers, the fright they receive (vs. 2-4), and their corrupt understanding with the chief priests and elders (vs. 11-15), is peculiar to Matthew, and has so been held to be a legendary addition ; but, if we examine Mark's Gospel, we shall find that the days of the crucifixion were marked by earthquake phenomena (xv. 33, 38), thus furnishing a basis for the tradition in Matthew. Omitting the story of Christ's appearances in Mark, we still have in his Gospel the earthquake, the angelic appearance, and the message to the women that Jesus has risen from the dead, and is to be seen by his disciples when they go into Galilee. So the very earliest tradition, according to the critics, has materials in it which are supposed to be the creations of the legend-making process.

But is there not growth in the assumed legendary matter? Mark, who comes first, does not have the appearance of Jesus ; Matthew, who follows him, does. There should be further growth as the time proceeds, if the assumption is correct. It is not to be supposed that the process stops with Matthew. But Luke, who follows Matthew in time, has the coming of the

women to the tomb, the angelic appearance and message to the women (xxiv. 1-11). Then follows Jesus' appearance to two disciples, as they were walking to Emmaus (vs. 13-32), and to the band of apostles that evening in the upper chamber (vs. 33-43). This story has many new features in it. Jesus appears in bodily form, offers himself to be touched and handled by them, shows them his hands and feet, and eats before them to convince them that he is no spirit, but is present in bodily form. This might seem to be the magnifying work of legend; but the Gospel of Matthew tells us that the women held Jesus by the feet, and that he talked to them. So, as far as legendary appearances go, there is no growth in substantial points from Matthew to Luke. But John is at least fifteen years later than Luke. What is the state of this later narrative? John tells us that Mary Magdalen went to the tomb early on the morning of the first day of the week, and, finding it empty, went in search of Peter and John, and, after finding them, returned to weep, and saw Jesus standing near her, but did not know him till he spoke to her (xx. 1-18). He further narrates that Jesus appeared to the disciples that evening, that he passed through closed doors for that purpose, and a week later

he appeared to them again, this time to satisfy the unbelief of Thomas by showing him his hands and wounded side (xx. 19-29). Critics have supposed chapter twenty-one to have been added later. If so, there should certainly appear the marks of increasing legend. But we have the story of another appearance of Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee, and resembling the others given in this Gospel and the others in all essential features. There is no new element of importance added in this assumed later chapter. If, now, we compare the different Gospel stories of the resurrection, we find them alike in their essential contents. There is the risen body, the empty tomb, the angelic appearances, the message to the women of the resurrection ; and — omitting Mark — the risen, visible, tangible body of Jesus, with many of the functions it possessed in its earthly stage of being, but with certain strange aspects as well. On the essential points all are agreed.

We now pass to examine the Gospel of Mark, to discuss the question whether the omission of the narrative of the appearance of Jesus should be taken as an indication of the absence of the story from the earliest tradition. It is to be noted that the sixteenth chapter of Mark closes very abruptly at verse 8, and with so many marks of

incompleteness that the Church from the earliest days has held it to be incomplete, and in various ways has tried to supply the defect. Another and exceedingly significant fact which helps us to the opinion that the Gospel was intended to testify to the resurrection of Jesus, is the references which the Gospel credits Jesus with making to his resurrection. There are no less than six such predictions found in Mark (viii. 31 ; ix. 9, 10 ; ix. 31, 32 ; x. 34 ; xiv. 28 ; xiv. 58), where six are to be found in Matthew and but two in Luke. It is also worthy of note that these predictions recorded in Mark are accompanied by sayings explanatory of the fact that the apostles did not understand the references to his resurrection. In these predictions of the event are found strong indications of the recognition by the author of the prevalence of the tradition of its occurrence at the time of the writing of the Gospel. But we have absolute proof of the prevalence of the tradition at a very much earlier date than the writing of Mark. It is found in the first Epistle to the Corinthians (xv. 1-8), in which Paul testifies to the existence of the tradition as a matter of eye-witness as early as two or three years after the death of Jesus and at least thirty years previous to the writing of Mark. He declares that he



received it at his own conversion, that his readers also had received it and stood in it as a part of their faith; that Peter had seen Jesus, as had the apostles; that above five hundred had seen him, most of them still living at the time Paul wrote; that then he was seen of James, then of all the apostles again, and that, last of all, Paul himself had seen him. Here is a tradition widely accepted among the Christians as early as within two or three years of the death of Jesus. The force of this fact has been sought to be broken by the supposition that Paul was writing out of his intense conviction and zeal as a Pharisee and with the idea of enforcing the belief in the resurrection of the dead. But the supposition is not allowed by the plain statement which Paul makes that it is a matter of eye-witness and that, too, with regard to God, and subject to the most serious consequences in case the witness is not true (1 Cor. xv. 14, 15, 17). Here is something more than theory on the part of Paul. So breaks down the attempt to explain the stories of the resurrection of Jesus found in the New Testament as the result of legend making, operating during the years between the death of Jesus and the writing of the last Gospel. The stories existed in the minds of the Christian

disciples within three years of the death of Jesus ; and they existed then in all substantial features full grown. Within that time must the origin of the narratives be explained.

III. There are three possible explanations : one that the apostles imagined them, another that they invented them, and the third that they gave them as descriptive of the facts. The first question to be considered is : Did the apostles imagine that they saw Jesus after he had died and been buried ? We must consider the full meaning of their reports. Within three years of his death there is in circulation among the men who had known him and been with him through the most of his ministry the story that he had been seen repeatedly in the body, that he had walked with them, talked with them, and offered himself for their examination, showing them his hands, and feet, and wounded side. This is the content of their imaginations, if they are imaginations. Such a state of mind as this must have its explanation only in a most powerful and absorbing belief and expectation. A delusion so deep as this cannot have been the creation of a day or a year. Were there, then, in the beliefs of the apostles ideas with such powerful hold upon their minds as to make them think that they

had seen him whom they knew so well, when he had died and passed beyond recall from the eyes of men? We have abundant testimony as to their ideas in the New Testament and in the records that tell us as to the opinions of their days and people. Jesus chose his apostles from the common people among the Galileans; and among them the most positive desire was for a restoration of the national independence and the reign of a powerful king who should once more establish the kingdom of Israel. This desire was dominant in the minds of Jesus' disciples; and they expected that Jesus was to become that king, and they his generals and judges. Their kingdom of heaven was a kingdom on this earth and with earthly power, stations, and honors. Their ambitions were to sit in these stations of power and enjoy these honors. This conception of the kingdom was with them at the start and did not leave them till the end. On the way up to Jerusalem, when Jesus was taking his last journey thither and was about to die, they fell into a dispute as to which one of them should be first, a dispute they renewed as they reclined at the table of the last supper. But Jesus had an entirely different idea, and told them that he was going up to Jerusalem to die; but that he should rise

again from the dead. Was there not here sufficient ground for the new conception to find root to grow and fill their minds, so that they should imagine that they had seen him? Let us see how they received his thought. Peter, full of his own notion of what the Messiah ought to be and to do, began to rebuke his Master for what seemed to him a discouraged outlook (Mark viii. 31-33); and James and John came with their mother to ask the chief seats in the new kingdom (Mark x. 35-40). More than once, when Jesus had spoken to them of his death and resurrection, it is explained that they did not understand him; and once Mark says that they did not dare to ask him what he meant (ix. 32). There is no wonder that they failed to grasp his meaning, with their views as to the nature of the kingdom. After he had died, we find no change in their ideas. The women expect only to find his dead body and hope only to be enabled to anoint it for its final rest in the grave (Mark xvi. 1). When they tell the disciples that they had seen him, the disciples regarded their words as idle tales (Luke xxiv. 11). When the two were walking with him on the road to Emmaus they are made to say that they had hoped he was to redeem Israel (Luke xxiv. 21). They are

discouraged by his death. When Jesus appears in the midst of his disciples they are terrified and cannot believe that it is he (Luke xxiv. 37). So far as the narratives go, there is not only absolutely no ground for an opinion such as would ascribe to the disciples an anticipation of his resurrection, but there is the best possible ground for the opinion that it was the one thing for which they were not prepared, and for whose significance they had no mental receptivity. The state of mind herein revealed is one that forbids any candid critic to ascribe the narratives of the resurrection to delusion and imagination on the part of the apostles. All expectation of such an event was absent from their minds; and, consequently, there was no cause that in the slightest degree could have worked toward delusion.

But it may be said that the apostles had so long dwelt upon the idea that Jesus was to be the Messiah that they could not relinquish it when he had died and disappointed the expectation; so they began to cast about to find some other sense in which he could be the Messiah than in the worldly sense they had formerly cherished; and in their sorrow they remembered sayings he had uttered, and some glimpse of his teachings came to them; and they in-

ferred that he had risen, and in the tender memories they held of him they recognized his presence. There are a number of replies to be made to this supposition. In the first place, the persistence and strength of their first notion regarding the Messiahship of Jesus was of such a nature that it is doubtful if a change of conception would have been possible without some inducing cause much more powerful than their faint recollections of his sayings would have furnished. The evidence is that they did not remember his sayings at the time of his death. It is more natural to suppose that his death would have overthrown their belief in his Messiahship, or at least discouraged it. And just this appears by the accounts to have been the effect. In other words, their recognition of his real nature and mission did not have sufficient hold upon their minds to have led them to make such a profound change in their conceptions, least of all, to inspire them with such enthusiastic faith in his glorious triumph over the grave as they had. Besides this, they represent that they had seen him, and repeatedly; that they had heard him speak, and he had told them of his glorious estate, and charged them to make it known to all people. A bare statement of the elements of the situation is sufficient

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to put this problem in clear light. Here are a lot of simple-minded peasants from Galilee, filled with the political conceptions of the kingdom of God and its king, who follow Jesus about for a space of two or three years, and retain their common notions up to the end, in spite of his teachings and rebukes, who quarrel over the worldly honors that they expect are to come to them as his servants even under the shadow of his cross, who after his death are downcast and discouraged and on the point of surrendering their faith in him, yet within a few days coming to a new conception of the kingdom, so profound and clear that they are confident that he has become a spiritual king, risen to the abode of God himself, whence he is to give life to all the children of earth, and that, moreover, they had seen him before his ascent, beheld his wounded hands, feet, and side, heard him speak and tell them of the new life and its glorious triumphs. They had believed in a worldly prince; now they believed in a heavenly king. They were full of sorrow and discouragement; now they were full of joy and enthusiasm. They were to be earthly potentates, and when they were disappointed would return to their old life as humble peasants; now they were to be preachers of the eternal life, and servants of

a risen and glorified Saviour of men. And the sole cause to be assigned to this mighty transformation is a recollection of his sayings, that they take pains to tell us they did not have, and their sorrow over his death, which they tell us ended in discouragement. No natural development of such teachings can be shown to have taken place from the state of mind they were in after his death; and if it were one made by the apostles, it must have been an invention consciously wrought out.

In the face of this alternative let us examine anew the emphasis that Paul puts upon the idea that this is the statement of eye-witnesses. He has said that it was a part of their faith, which he had preached to them, which they had received, and in which they stood, and by which they were to be saved, unless they believed in vain (1 Cor. xv. 1-4). He then goes on to say that it is the faith of eye-witnesses, who were Peter, the entire body of the apostles, then more than five hundred disciples, most of whom were alive to speak for themselves; then of his own brother James, then of the apostles again, and last of himself, also (vs. 5-8). Paul lays stress upon the strength of this testimony, citing only well-known witnesses, except in the case of the great number of the unknown be-

lievers, whose very multitude adds emphasis to their testimony, and whose being still alive renders them open to appeal if the testimony is to be doubted. And, finally, he casts his own repute into the scale as the final pledge of veracity. If, now, there were no ground of delusion and no fact to answer to the story, there is only a falsehood, pure and simple, told for dogmatic reasons by the man who carried the new life of spiritual righteousness to the Gentiles. If, now, we turn to the records in the Gospels, we shall find there that the writers take particular pains to explain that they were not prepared for the story of his resurrection. So if they were putting down an inference as a fact, they are taking pains to show us that it could not have been an inference by stating openly that they did not understand what the rising from the dead could mean, and also by narrating formally, and in many subtle ways implying that they had no idea of his resurrection after his death. We are aware that children will in innocence tell that they have seen and done things that have an existence only within their imaginations. But when a child undertakes to show that this is not an imagination, and to do it, not only by direct statement, but by hint, by implication, and by providing

for inference between the lines, we are prepared for the conclusion that we have in that child a precocity of depravity that marks it as an ethical monstrosity. And this is precisely the state of the case in the Gospels, if there is no basis of fact under the narratives of the resurrection. But there are some exceedingly strong proofs that such could not have been the moral temper of the early Christians. In the first place, they taught that the faith of Christ was in the real ethical life of the human soul, where the Holy Spirit of truth had its abiding place. In the second place, the teaching of the apostles laid special stress on truth speaking and against lying; and, in the third place, early Christianity was the one great influence to restore ethical sanity to the multitudes of the Roman empire from whose hearts all faith had died out, and in whom superstition had run into its worst state of degeneracy.

A single other line of thought closes the consideration of this problem; and that is that the idea of the kingdom of heaven as it came to be held by the early Christians clearly grew out of the recognition of the significance of the resurrection, and could have had its origin only from the recognition of that as a fact. The Synoptic Gospels treat the idea of the kingdom of God

or heaven as an outgrowth of the fact of the resurrection or intimately connected with it. Time and again Jesus is made to speak of his coming in his kingdom as conditioned upon his death and resurrection. In Matthew x. 23, where Jesus is speaking of the trials that are to befall his disciples after his death, he tells them to continue in their work, for they shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come, referring to his coming as the Messiah after his death. Then in Matthew xvi. 27, 28, where he is speaking in immediate connection with the anticipation of his death, he tells his disciples that he shall come in his kingdom with God's holy angels, and so shortly that some of them shall live to see him so come. The parable of the pounds (Luke xix. 11-27) contains as its main teaching the idea that Jesus is to go away to receive his kingdom and return to rule in judgment and award. There is no doubt at all that the idea which the early disciples cherished of the return of Jesus in person and in bodily form, as they had seen him disappear (Acts i. 11), was due to their belief in his ascension into heaven in bodily, though not in fleshly form. Whatever may be thought of the authorship of the Acts of the Apostles, the reality of the historical element in it is not

questioned by such liberal critics as Reuss, Weisäcker, and Keim; and it repeatedly assigns the knowledge of the meaning of the kingdom of heaven to the knowledge of the resurrection. One of the fundamental ideas of the Fourth Gospel is that the excarnation of the Christ was essential to his entrance into his glory and the full possession of his power as the Son of God, an idea, by the way, that is expressed in Luke's story of the walk to Emmaus: "O fools! and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have written! Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory?" While Paul makes the death of Christ symbolize not only the redemption of the human soul from the power of the flesh and its desires, but the final redemption of the entire creation from the bondage of corruption into the freedom of the glory of God's children. And this redemption of the souls of men has its pledge in the resurrection of the Christ. Turn to the apostolic literature anywhere you will, and you will find that the starting point of its teachings is in the fact of the resurrection of Christ. With this staring us in the face, with no sound ground for tracing the development of the apostles' idea of the kingdom from the ideas held by them before Christ's death, and with the plainest



indications that his death alone resulted in deeper darkness and discouragement, we must accept as a tremendous fact the occurrence of the rising from the dead, and the visible appearance to his disciples of the crucified Nazarene.





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